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The Small, Part-Time Farmer: Hobbyist, Welfare Case
or Backbone of Rural America

By

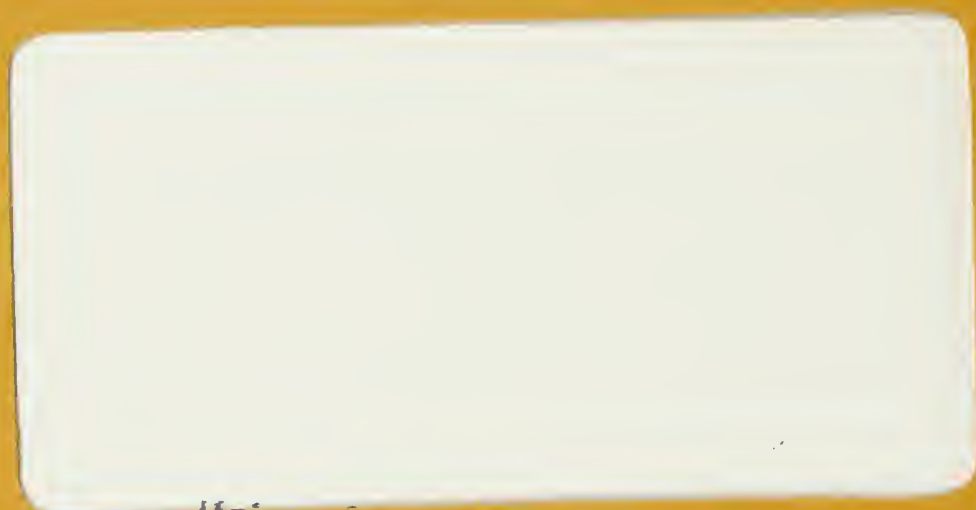
F. C. Fliegel, E. B. Harper and J. C. van Es

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THE SMALL, PART-TIME FARMER:
HOBBYIST, WELFARE CASE OR BACKBONE OF RURAL AMERICA^{1/}

By


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ABSTRACT

A two-county survey, conducted in Illinois during the summer of 1980, collected data on 348 small farmers, operating between 5 and 99 acres and having gross sales of at least \$1,000. Peoria County centers on the City of Peoria, which had a 1970 population of over 120,000, and provides a sizeable off-farm labor market; Wayne County centers on the town of Fairfield with a 1970 population of approximately 6,000, and provides relatively few opportunities for off-farm employment.

Survey data are used to raise questions about several popular stereotypes of the small farmer. These stereotypes--the small farmer as hobbyist, welfare case, or backbone of rural society--are rejected. An explication of farm work roles leads to several conclusions: small farmers are not farmers by occupation; they benefit from the identity provided by the occupational role of farmer; they derive prestige from their status as land owners; and they are attracted to farming by intrinsic satisfactions derived from exercising craft skills.

The Small, Part-Time Farmer:
Hobbyist, Welfare Case, or Backbone of Rural America?

INTRODUCTION

The small farm is something of an enigma in contemporary North American agriculture and rural society. People continue to operate small farms though the conventional wisdom has it that such units don't make economic sense. Given the rapid decline in farm numbers in recent decades, and the corresponding absorption of small farm units into larger ones, it is tempting to view the remaining small farms as a vestige of times past. From that historical perspective the contemporary small farmer may be treated as either the poverty-stricken farmer who has not yet made it out of agriculture, as the last line of defense against take-over of rural society by big capital, or as some combination of the two. In the absence of solid empirical information the depiction of small farmers depends heavily on the interpreter's implicit value position as to whether small farm operators should remain in agriculture, and assumptions about the value positions of small farm operators themselves. Another value position takes for granted that the small farmer's existence should be determined by the free market. From this perspective those who engage in small-scale agriculture do so by choice. By virtue of operating small units in the contemporary production setting where their position is marginal, they are written off as irrelevant to the industry and are viewed as hobbyists.

The purpose of the present paper is to argue that the value perspectives sketched out above are probably valid to a degree, depending on where samples are taken and how sampling units are defined. Some small farmers are hobbyists, some are welfare cases, and some are self-consciously acting out a role defined by agrarian ideals. By the same token, since all of these

perspectives have a degree of applicability to small-scale agriculture, and to large-scale agriculture, none of them are very useful in characterizing the contemporary small-farm phenomenon. This paper will attempt to clear away some of the conceptual and ideological under-brush which has grown up through our reliance on inappropriate data and persistent use of categories which have no clear meaning.

This paper will argue that it is inappropriate to view small-scale farming as an occupation, but that farm work, rural life-styles, and the intrinsic satisfactions which stem from utilization of craft skills are the necessary conditions for the persistence of the small farm. In addition, the paper will argue that the identity provided by the farm work role constitutes a sufficient explanation for the persistence and even growth in numbers of small farms. The question as to whether a small farm is profitable or economically rational is thus overridden in favor of an explanation based on non-monetary satisfactions that are not well described by the term "hobby."

DEFINITIONS, CONCEPTS AND COMMON SENSE

Defining what is both small and a farm is largely an exercise in futility because alternate definitions abound and most are grounded in census data intended to describe the industry rather than the operating units which contribute to that industry. The more widely used definitions applied to the small farm in U.S. agriculture in recent decades have focused on gross sales (Carlin and Crecink, 1979). Whether one chooses to use a sales volume of \$20,000 to define the upper limit of that which is small, or makes a concession to inflation and chooses a \$40,000 sales cutting point, is not a critical choice. In either case, a huge fraction,

up to as many as 80 percent of all U.S. farms (Dewitt, et al., 1980), end up being defined as small farms.^{2/} The populations designated by these inclusive definitions are so heterogeneous that attempts to characterize "the small farm" are unsuccessful. Minimum acreage criteria, which are also used at times, have advantages and disadvantages relative to sales' definitions, and again the minima specified have the effect that the majority of all farms are labelled small farms (Lewis, 1978). This feature of both the sales and acreage definitions in current use seriously diminishes their analytic utility.

Other problems in drawing definitional boundaries around the small farm stem from the lack of appropriate data. The Census of Agriculture is the major data source; it counts farm firms and aggregates their characteristics to describe the industry. People, including farm people, are the focus of the Census of Population. Given the absence of a practical way to merge the agricultural and population data, it is difficult to learn much about farming as an occupation, about the role of the firm in people's lives, and so on. As a consequence, the farm firm, no matter how small, tends to be treated as though it has or could have consequences in people's lives which may be quite unrealistic. The small farm is recorded as a business firm and the operator of that farm firm is counted as a farmer, the operator of a business. In absence of descriptive data to provide a background for viewing the entities tabulated, there is a tendency to attribute meanings to them which are not justified by fact. For example, because small farm firms usually have limited income-producing potential, there is a strong tendency among those who deal with such data to assume that families on

small farms are poor. The limited data on farm family income make it clear that poverty is definitely not the general case (Lewis, 1978; Carlin and Crecink, 1979). Another common assumption is that the farm family's non-farm income is "supplemental"; for small farmers, however, it is clearly the other way around--farm income is supplemental to non-farm income. Such a misconception illustrates the need for a shift in perspective, if we are to realistically characterize the small farmer. If one continues to view the small farm only in terms of its economic significance, it is likely that other important motivations for continuing to operate such farms will be overlooked.

A basic difficulty in defining the small farm is implicit in the preceding discussion and affects both data gathering and data interpretation. Terms such as "farm" and "farmer" can be described as "natural" concepts (Larson, 1977: xi), concepts embedded in the language and culture. The agricultural industry has unquestionably been transformed in the last several generations. As a result, the objects and actors embraced by the traditional labels today bear little resemblance to the corresponding objects and actors of even a generation ago. The operator of a contemporary small farm is described as a farmer, when occupationally that individual is typically not a farmer at all (Taylor and Jones, 1964: 288-308). A university professor, for example, who invests in real estate, is unlikely to become known as a "landlord" or "realtor," unless such investments become conspicuously large. That same professor, however, can purchase or rent a few acres in the country and by just letting things grow on the land can easily adopt the label "farmer," with the residence becoming known as a "farm."

The reasons for such contemporary labelling by people in the community can only lie in the historical prominence of farming, while such labelling by others, outside of the local community, may reflect certain political advantages in keeping farm numbers high. For present purposes, the concepts "farm" and "farmer," not even mentioning "family farm," are so fraught with traditional meanings as to be technically useless. Yet no clear alternatives are available, and thus the social scientist's attempts to cope with the real world will continue to be distorted by the outmoded concepts in use.

At first glance it would seem that adding a further qualification to the definition of the small farm, its part-time employment nature, would complicate the definitional problem. This is not necessarily the case, however. A cursory examination of farm family income statistics makes it clear that today off-farm employment is the major source of farm family income, and that the dominance of non-farm income is most apparent for families on smaller farm units (Carlin and Crecink, 1979; Crecink, 1979). It is reasonable, therefore, to treat the small farm, as a part-time and secondary employment situation. We suggest that except for a study of certain "deviant cases," there is little point in viewing the small farm as other than part-time. In the balance of this paper the high degree of overlap of the two kinds of categories -- small farm and part-time farm -- will be taken for granted.

Reference to part-time farming again brings to light the need for a shift in analytic perspective. Part-time farming is usually viewed as something to be avoided, to be "corrected," if possible, by the marshalling of additional financial and physical resources. It is commonly assumed that full-time farming is the preferred objective. However, it is quite

possible that small farmers prefer to pursue farming on a part-time basis, (Fuguitt, et al., 1977). and that such designations as "resource poor" have little meaning to the people on small farms. Similarly, the small farmer tends to be viewed as someone who needs managerial help in running the farm, but the perception of need may be that of the analyst rather than the actor in the small farm situation. This paper will attempt to explore some ideas which suggest that life on a small farm may be a preferred choice, and one which is not particularly problematic.

The definitional problems described above can remain unresolved for present purposes. Operational definitions are not likely to be accepted unequivocally if the concepts used to construct the definitions lack precise denotative meaning. It is sufficient to say that all current operational definitions indicate that there are many small farms in existence. A continuation of the current trend of the "disappearing middle" (Madden and Tischbein, 1979) will make small farm units more visible over time in that contrasts with larger units are increasing. In addition, some trend data using the conventional categories indicate that small farm units are not only becoming relatively more visible, but are actually increasing in numbers (Harper, et al., 1980; Lasley and Heffernan, 1981). It is important, therefore, to work toward greater conceptual clarity in order to understand what the role of the small farm in contemporary American agriculture may be.

STEREOTYPES OF THE SMALL FARMER

This section of the paper is intended to raise questions about the stereotypes alluded to in the title of the paper -- the small farmer as hobbyist, welfare case, or backbone of rural America. Some illustrative

data are presented to highlight conceptual issues. The final section of the paper then outlines a broader conceptual framework, the purpose of which is to gain insight into the role of the small farm in the contemporary, agribusiness context.

Illustrative data

Interviews were conducted with 348 small farm families in two Illinois counties in the summer of 1980. All families residing on and operating farms (as defined by the Census of Agriculture) of more than 5 and less than 100 acres in the two counties were interviewed. The acreage definition of the small farm was chosen on pragmatic grounds; 100 acres of farmland, owned or rented, is an objectively small unit in the context of Corn Belt agriculture.

The two counties were selected to represent the differences in nonfarm employment opportunities which characterize the state and Corn Belt agriculture as a whole. Peoria County is economically centered on the Peoria metropolitan area with its substantial job market in manufacturing, trade, and service industries. Peoria County represents a situation in which small-scale agriculture can readily be combined with a variety of nonfarm types of employment. The second county, Wayne, lies in the southern part of the state, and has no population center with as many as 10,000 people. Wayne County is an agricultural county with limited nonfarm employment opportunities, and it was assumed that small-scale agriculture in that context would tend to conform to the poverty stereotype.

Respondents were asked a variety of questions about their farms, their nonfarm jobs, their families, life styles, and so on. Data from

these respondents are reported below in an essentially ad hoc manner, to illustrate, to raise questions, but not to test hypotheses.

The stereotypes

Hobby farmer is a term applied to operators of farms of varying size but usually small, with emphasis on the connotation that the individual so labelled is not serious about what is assumed to be a very serious business -- supplying food and fiber for the nation and the world. The denotative meaning, based on the dictionary definition of the word hobby, singles out the hobbyist as one who is oriented to farming purely as a leisure pursuit or favorite pastime. In actual practice, however, stress is put on a connotative meaning in which a normative line is drawn between the assumed public service orientation of the professional (Larson, 1977), and the orientation of one assumed to be an amateur or dilettante. Another connotation of the term hobbyist as applied to farmers focuses on assumptions about motives: it is suggested that some hobbyists may be motivated by the opportunities for tax reduction or avoidance. Both of these connotative meanings are normative in that they distinguish between an assumed public service orientation of the professional and the assumed self-serving orientation of the hobbyist. The professional-amateur distinction also draws attention to an assumed difference in cognitive skills between those who are serious about farming and those who are not (Larson, 1977).

There have been very few attempts to provide descriptive information about hobby farming. Troughton (1976) provides a concise discussion and analysis on the basis of data from southern Ontario. Hobby farming, in Troughton's discussion, refers to farming as a vo-

cation or pastime, as would seem appropriate in view of the accepted denotative meaning of the word hobby. Value overtones enter the discussion indirectly in that Troughton sees the contemporary hobby farm as historically rooted in the landed estate. Thus, hobby farming takes on another area of meaning.

Whether the small farm can be viewed as a hobby farm and thus as a mini-estate in any general sense is open to question. The occupational characteristics of hobby farmers cited by Troughton (1976: 150) are as follows: 30 percent are administrators or professionals, while 49 percent are craftsmen and operatives. The comparable occupational data for the Illinois' sample described earlier are even more heavily weighted toward blue collar occupations: 16 percent administrative/professional, and 72 percent craftsmen, operatives, and transport workers.^{3/} The status overtones of the landed estate and mini-estate imagery invoked by Troughton would seem to be inconsistent with the blue collar occupations of the bulk of respondents in either sample, though probably appropriate for a minority, especially in the shadow of a large city such as Toronto. For example, some of Spectorsky's (1965) exurbanites fit well into the estate and mini-estate mold.

Hobby farming as a leisure pursuit or favorite pastime does not seem to describe the Illinois sample. The typical Illinois small farm operator (male) reported spending at least 20 hours per week on farm work on a year-round basis. Time commitments of that order do not fit well with the connotative meanings usually associated with the term "pastime". In addition, the fact that 64 percent of the Illinois' small farm operators concentrated on cash grain production is inconsistent

with the aesthetic, or perhaps frivolous, overtones of the "hobby" label. The Illinois respondents were almost universally involved in the production of standard commodities: grain, beef, pork, and hay. The nature of that type of farming activity suggests strong ties with commercial agriculture, rather than an optional, pastime activity.

On balance, one can conclude that the term hobby farming has analytic utility for some small farmers, but for only a minority. Small farmers in general are probably not well served by the hobby label in an analytic sense. Rather, they would seem to be denigrated by the normative connotations of the term as it is used. To be small is to be viewed as an amateur or "dabbler" in agribusiness circles. Consequently, it is likely that small farmers will be dismissed as a relatively unimportant group, and their persistence will continue to remain a mystery. To unquestionably accept the view that small farmers are hobbyists may be quite misleading, and once again it appears that a shift in perspective is required.

The small farmer as welfare case is another stereotype which can be handled quite briefly in this paper. There is no question that there has been a massive movement of farmers out of North American agriculture in recent decades, and against that background it is understandable that attention should focus on those least able to compete -- the small or resource-poor farmer. Marshall's (1974) work on the small farmer in the southern U.S., for example, makes it clear that poverty is still a serious problem for the small farmers in certain areas. In general, however, the negative recruitment process has run its course. The farm population has been pared down to a point where further reductions cannot produce large outflows. The data on farm family income cited earlier do

not suggest substantial poverty, and this is buttressed by the illustrative data from the Illinois' sample. The modal family income of the Illinois sample is around \$20,000. Thus they can better be described as middle-income rather than poor families. Only 13 percent of the sample derived as much as half of their family income from farming. Only four percent of the sample could be described as below the poverty line and these few cases all proved to be elderly couples, most of whom had no other dependents. It is safe to conclude, then, that the poverty label, although still regularly invoked in discussions of the small farmer, should be treated as an out-dated stereotype. It makes no more sense to assume that the small farmer is poor than it does to assume that the average investor in urban real estate is poor.

The small farmer as the backbone of rural society is a complex stereotype, complex because it is so completely encrusted with ideological overtones that it is all but impossible to engage in an unbiased, rational discourse on the topic. Sorokin, Zimmerman, and Galpin, in their famous Source Book (Vol. 1, 1930: 143-145), include a delightful tabulation of "opinions" on farming and rural life of scores of social philosophers, historians, and others, over the centuries. The tabulation is evidence enough that the roots of agrarian ideals concerning farm life as healthy, farmers as virtuous, and so on, are very deep and very widely dispersed. Contemporary revivals, illustrated by the recent emergence of several advocacy groups (Crittenden, 1980), can appeal to embedded agrarian ideals to work toward a variety of ends.

Agrarian ideology can perhaps best be summarized in the general idea that the yeoman farmer, historically a small-scale producer of agricultural products, is a (or the) fundamental building block, the backbone,

of an idealized, democratic society. Elements of that ideology are clearly applicable to and accepted by contemporary small farmers. The Illinois sample of small farmers, for example, strongly endorsed such propositions as: The family farm is very important to democracy (91 percent agreed with the statement). A whole series of statements that focused on the virtues and the naturalness of farm life and farm people were unequivocally supported by respondents. Similarly, to the extent that the backbone theme implies stability and continuity, it is true that small farmers in Illinois are predominantly the sons and daughters of farmers and that they have a commitment to their roles as small-farm operators. The Illinois data confirm the fact that many small and part-time farms do not represent a temporarily occupied rung in the traditional agricultural ladder but are well entrenched in rural areas (see also Fuguitt, et al., 1977: 1).^{4/}

A variety of further elements of the "backbone" theme could be listed but the critical feature of those elements is that they do not discriminate between farm and nonfarm people and/or lack predictive utility for other reasons. Buttell and Flinn (1975), for example, find that urban residents are about as likely to subscribe to agrarian ideals as those in rural areas, which suggests that these beliefs are part of the culture as a whole. The point at issue here is that small farmers are by no means alone in upholding a set of traditional and cherished values.

Furthermore, it has not been demonstrated that scores on measures of agrarian values predict anything except comparable scores on other attitude and value measures (cf. Buttell and Flinn, 1975): the link between such beliefs and various behaviors has not been demonstrated and may not exist. While the respondents in the Illinois survey overwhelmingly agree with certain agrarian value items, there is no evidence that their lifestyles

conform with the backbone ideal. For the most part, small farmers appear to be as much a part of urban society as they are of rural society. Most of them commute to an off-farm job (usually full-time), and also spend at least 20 hours a week at work on the farm. Their use and knowledge of the local agricultural service agencies is very limited or non-existent, and approximately one-third of them indicate that most of their friends do not live in rural areas. The time factor may also suggest that many of these small farmers are, at best, only marginal participants in the rural community. Since most of them currently live in two-person households, their ties to the community are probably less than one would imagine, based on the old notions about the "farm family." The presence of children in the home generally expands the opportunities for participation in certain organizations, and thus expands the family's number of formal and informal contacts in the community.

The above information, combined with the fact that the entire farm population is but a small minority of the rural population in Illinois, leads us to the conclusion that the small farmers in our sample fit the "backbone" ideal no more than any other rural resident. This raises the key question as to whether the "backbone of rural America" theme has any validity at all in describing the modern small farmer, or whether it is in fact another out-moded, irrelevant stereotype.

To summarize, several stereotypes of the small farmer have been reviewed and questioned. All are rich in connotative meanings and weak in their ability to characterize the small farm phenomenon. Some small farmers are hobbyists, some are poor, and some are undoubtedly key figures in local affairs. In aggregate, however, they remain an anomaly in the contemporary

social and economic context of both agriculture and rural society, given the conceptual tools currently in use. The following section of this paper is an attempt to take a closer, updated look at farming as an occupation, at work roles and the meaning of work, in order to gain some insight into the apparent viability of small farm life.

Farming as craft, occupation, and profession

Figure 1 displays a classification of work roles related to farming which may help to explain the persistence of small-scale agriculture and provide an alternative to the outmoded stereotypes of small farmers. Although the central purpose here is to characterize small farmers, the task is facilitated by comparing and contrasting their work roles with those of farmers in commercial agriculture. Describing the total picture allows one to address the implicit questions raised by the previous discussion of the hobby, poverty and backbone stereotypes -- that is, to what extent do the agricultural work roles of small farmers distinguish them as a group?

(Figure 1 about here)

The categories described in Figure 1 are deliberately focused on the work roles and broader occupational orientation of the farmer, in order to draw attention away from the small farm as a production enterprise and toward the small farmer. Evidence has demonstrated that the small farm is not a critical economic venture, either to the agricultural industry or to the small farm operator (Crecink, 1979a; Crecink, 1979b). It is proposed that the traditional preoccupation with the small farm as a production enterprise has resulted in well-intended but inappropriate concern with small farm profits (see, for example, Huffman, 1980; Ellerman and Solvet

1980; Loomis, 1975). If the persistence of small farms is to be understood, the analytic perspective must be expanded to include the contemporary role and status of the farmer as an individual.

With this purpose in mind the first row of Figure 1 provides some conventional descriptive labels of farmers which are intended to provide a familiar starting point for a discussion of farmer work roles. The array of columns is not intended to describe sharp distinctions in farm size, nor is it intended to imply that the categories are discrete.^{5/} The left-hand column is meant to describe important aspects of the small farmers' agricultural work role, while the three right-hand columns describe work roles of those farmers within the broader category of commercial agriculture. A distinction is made between the commercial farmer (column 2) and the contract farmer (column 3) on the grounds that in the latter case the farmers' work role is constrained to a degree by a contract. Such a distinction is justified by the realization that the contract farmer is increasingly typical in commercial agriculture. For example, in the broiler industry it is now estimated that 97 percent of all broilers are produced under some form of external control: 90 percent under production contracts and 7 percent directly by integrated broiler processing firms (Reimund, et al., 1981). Not only the broiler industry, but other agricultural subsectors (such as vegetable production and seed grain production) appear to be experiencing similar structural changes (Schertz, et al., 1978); therefore, a discussion of farmer work roles should recognize the prevalence of contract farming, and its distinction as a separate category within commercial agriculture. The fourth column of Figure 1 refers to the residual category in commercial agriculture — the farm firm in which the "farmer"

is largely a financial manager, and control of the firm and its day-to-day operation may well be vested in different individuals.

The first entry in row 2 describes the small farmer as a lifestyle-maximizing agricultural craftsman. The choice of this label is best explained by examining the primary farm work role (row 3), in relation to those of the agricultural production manager, the agricultural production franchise holder, and the financial manager. For the small farmer, management (except possibly time management) should not be much of an issue, and the work role is primarily that of exercising traditional craft skills. Craft skills in this context are defined as "hands-on" involvement in a variety of tasks which require some skill and experience, and are traditionally associated with the act of farming -- tasks such as plowing, planting, and maintaining and repairing machinery. In the absence of a strong economic rationale for the small farm it may be precisely these craft skills, and the intrinsic satisfaction derived from their use, that are key elements in explaining the persistence of small-scale agriculture.

The second entry in row 2 describes the commercial farmer as an agricultural production manager, whose primary work role (row 3) includes the provision of management as well as labor. In other words, this farm operator makes the major decisions concerning the farm operation, and is personally involved in carrying out those decisions. The production manager's role is distinct then from that of the franchise holder (column 3) for whom the management function is partially transferred to an external organization, and the farm operator more nearly monitors than manages the production process (Blauner, 1964). By sacrificing some autonomy in decision-making, the contract operator minimizes certain market risks. In this situation, the farm operator's management role is constrained to a degree by a contract.

The last entry in row 3 describes the financial manager as primarily an entrepreneur, in charge of capital, while the labor and production management functions are often assumed by different actors. In the sense that this farmer is a well-trained businessman who exercises power and autonomy in the organization of the firm, farming for him is more a profession than an occupation (Hall, 1975). There may be little or no personal involvement in the actual production process, and conversely there may be considerable dependence on employees ranging from the professional farm manager to the technician and unskilled labor. As one would expect of a professional, this farmer receives certain intrinsic rewards by virtue of his control over an organization which provides a substantial volume of a product considered essential to the health and welfare of society (Hall, 1975).^{6/}

For both the production manager and franchise holder, agriculture is typically a full-time job or occupation (row 4). Here occupation is defined in a narrow sense as "a means of earning of living". Both of these types of farmers provide some of the skilled labor themselves, but may also hire additional labor, either semi-skilled or unskilled.

In contrast to commercial agriculture where farming is either an occupation or profession, for the small farmer the primary occupational role is in a nonfarm setting. Farm work is important as a means of expressing certain individual and family goals associated with a particular lifestyle. The producers in this category derive a considerable benefit from identification with the farming occupation (Heffernan and Green, 1980), but it is a secondary work activity, and is not important in an occupational sense.

There is little question that the satisfactions derived from task performance are of major importance to small farmers (Gasson, 1974). However, it should not be concluded that the intrinsic rewards (identified in the first entry of row 5) equate small farmers with "hobbyists" in the conventional use of the term. While they may attach different meanings to their farm work than the commercial farmers, we reiterate that there is no indication in the Illinois data that farming for them is merely a leisure pursuit.

It can be argued that another attraction of the small farm for these people may be the relative absence of intrinsic rewards in many off-farm jobs (Heffernan and Green, 1980). A preponderance of craft jobs among small farmers (at least in the Illinois sample), would seem to indicate a relatively high degree of inherent occupational identity (as machinist, carpenter, and so on). The potential for occupational identity is probably not realized, however, because in most cases the work is performed under the aegis of an industrial or other firm. In most cases it seems unlikely that the individual is able to exercise the same type of autonomy and self-expression which is possible in his farm work, where the identity of the firm accrues to the individual. This argument is supported by the fact that 73 percent of the Illinois sample agreed with the statement that "we consider ourselves first and foremost a farm family", in spite of the fact that 87 percent of the males under age 60 held off-farm jobs. As mentioned previously, the majority of these jobs were blue collar jobs of the skilled and semi-skilled variety.

The work role satisfactions for farmers in commercial agriculture

are described in the remaining entries in row 5. For the agricultural production manager, rewards are both extrinsic and intrinsic -- extrinsic in the sense that farming is the primary source of income, and intrinsic in that the farmer derives satisfaction from exercising skills in task performance. In spite of the fact that this farmer may hire some labor, he typically has substantial personal involvement in the more skilled aspects of farm work, as well as the decision-making aspects. In contrast, the franchise holder's (row 5) work role satisfaction is described as primarily extrinsic. Control over production is partially transferred to an external organization, and the resultant rewards are in terms of income. Although the contract farmer is also a skilled worker, farming under this arrangement becomes a much more standardized operation, and one in which there is less opportunity for personally exercising managerial skills.

The last entry in row 5 describes the work role satisfaction of the financial manager as primarily intrinsic. In keeping with the idea that farming for him is more of a profession than an occupation, the rewards come from the application of cognitive, rather than manual skills (Larson, 1971). These skills most likely have been acquired through formal training, as well as through formal and informal associations with colleagues involved in similar entrepreneurial activities.

The discussion of work role satisfactions is illuminated somewhat by the entries in row 6, which describe the use of hired labor by the various types of farmers. Although hired labor is of little direct importance to the small farmer, the topic permits one to take the characterization of farm work roles one step further. Traditionally, status distinctions within agriculture have centered on the ladder concept of laborer-tenant-owner. With the increasing rationalization and mechanization of food

and fiber production, the role of the "hired man" in the sense of apprentice, and occupant of the lowest rung in the status ladder (cf. Schob, 1975), has all but disappeared. The small farm operator typically employs no hired labor, if for no other reason than that it is the intrinsic satisfaction derived from direct task performance that attracted the operator to small farm life in the first place. Hired labor is used by the agricultural production manager to a limited degree, often seasonally and only for specific tasks, with little implication of career progression into more responsible jobs. For many contract farming operations the role of hired labor is analogous to the repetitive performance of a single task by the assembly line worker in industry, except for the fact that in agriculture such jobs are seasonal. The type of labor generally used by the contract farmer is semi-skilled or unskilled. While the same is true of the entrepreneurial-type farmers (column 4), they are also likely to employ professionals and highly specialized technicians (in production management, disease control, and animal nutrition, for example.) This farmer is distinct from the other categories then in that his employees may also have professional credentials.^{7/}

Finally, the entries in the last row of Figure 1 are intended to address directly the status implications of the aggregate of the farm operator's work role. Land ownership, the traditional criterion of high status in the agricultural context is very important to small farmers, as indicated by the fact that only 19 percent of the Illinois sample rented any land. One would expect, however, that as the farmer's work role becomes more complex (in the commercial agriculture category), and the capital, management, and labor functions become more distinct, the relative importance of land ownership is diminished. Tenancy is not only increasingly

acceptable but prudent as business volume increases and the demand for production capital also increases (Bertrand, 1978). Land ownership, of course, does not disappear as a status criterion for the production manager, franchise holder, or financial manager, but it becomes less important relative to the status achieved from profits and volume of sales. Ownership of modern equipment can also have important status overtones, especially for the type of operator here described as agricultural production manager (column 2).

Summarizing the typology of work roles in Figure 1, it is proposed that farm operators' major work roles can be described as ranging from a part-time exercise of craft skills, to a full-time occupational role with considerable emphasis on management as well as manual labor, and finally to a professional role in which entrepreneurial and managerial activities with a correspondingly high stress on cognitive skills are dominant.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to examine some of the common stereotypes of small farmers in current use. It was concluded that while some small farmers may be described as hobbyists, poverty-stricken, or as solid citizens of rural society, none of these labels adequately portrays their role in agriculture or explains their persistence.

The central question is: why do people engage in small-scale agriculture? It is suggested that the answer lies in recognition of the work roles of the farm operator. While farming is an occupation for operators of commercial units, and a profession for some large-scale entrepreneurs, for small farmers it is secondary work from which certain benefits are derived. For most of them the adopted role of farmer is important in a

symbolic but not an economic sense. To categorize the small farmer as a farmer by occupation is misleading in that it implies performance expectations that are not realistic. At the same time, to categorize the small farmer as a hobbyist is misleading because it suggests that farming is merely a favorite pastime, rather than the labor-intensive, time-consuming, and serious activity which it appears to be for these people.

The characteristics of small farmer work roles identified here provide a tentative explanation for the current and perhaps continued viability of the small farm. The terminology or labels -- production manager, franchise holder, financial manager, and agricultural craftsman -- are intended to convey some important distinctions in the actual day-to-day activities of what are traditionally called "farmers." The descriptive categories can probably benefit from refinement or other modification, but their immediate utility lies in facilitating a shift in perspective away from primary emphasis on the farm as an economic unit toward a sociological emphasis on the farmer and farm work roles. Research on small farmers in particular would benefit from a shift away from viewing the small farm through the lens of a highly rationalized commercial agriculture, and toward a focus on the people involved and the roles they play. At the same time, our understanding of commercial agriculture would be enhanced by careful analysis of farm occupational and professional roles.

A concentration on the small farmers' work roles and their identification with other groups in agriculture (rather than on the enterprise) may help to more accurately predict future structural changes in agriculture, as well as other changes in such things as investment behavior or adoption behavior. Our finding (from the Illinois survey) that small

farmers emulate commercial farmers at least in their choices of enterprises suggests that they may also emulate them in their responses to innovations or alternative agricultural practices. If this were the case, it would dispel any notion that small farmers are the most likely group to embrace certain energy-conserving or environmentally sound practices.

Also, the recognition that the small farmer's work role is divided between "factory and farm," with the farm occupying a secondary position, has implications for the degree to which the small farm will continue to be a family tradition. It is reasonable to assume that children of contemporary small farmers will have considerably more urban exposure than those of previous generations. If they do choose for themselves a role in agriculture, it is likely that they will choose one which is similar to that of their parents -- part-time and lifestyle-oriented, rather than career-oriented. This suggests that small farming as a means of self expression could persist over time, but that small farming as a business enterprise will be the exceptional case. Only 33 percent of the Illinois sample agreed that their "children would be better off financially if they could live on a farm like this one." Thus, it is likely that most children will be socialized to choose something other than farming for their occupation.

The above are some issues which could be explored in a more comprehensive, comparative study of agricultural work roles. A modest beginning has been made by creating a conceptual classification which seems to best describe Illinois small farmers, in the context of Corn Belt agriculture. The efforts here lead to the conclusion that the present body of literature in occupational and agricultural sociology does not describe the variety of "farmers" in the contemporary agricultural setting. The essential task

then is to work toward building a more concise framework, which allows one to address research problems from a perspective which will be more closely attuned to reality, and less dependent on one's ideological stance for analysis.

Figure 1. Classification of Work Roles Related to Farming.

	Small, part-time farmer	Commercial Agriculture		
		Commercial farmer	Contract farmer	Agribusinessman
1. Conventional descriptive labels				
2. Suggested work role labels	Lifestyle-maximizing, agricultural craftsman	Agricultural production manager	Agricultural production franchise holder	Financial manager
3. Primary farm work role	Skilled worker; "jack-of-all-trades"	Production manager, skilled worker	Production monitor, skilled worker	Entrepreneur, manager of capital
4. Importance of agricultural work role in total work experience	Secondary, part-time work	Primary occupation	Primary occupation	Primary or secondary, as a profession, managing assets in agriculture and possibly in other enterprises.
5. Work role satisfaction	Intrinsic (craft skills, lifestyle, expression of individual and family goals, identification with other agricultural work roles/commercial agriculture)	Extrinsic/intrinsic (farm income, exercise of craft skills-task performance)	Extrinsic (farm income)	Intrinsic (exercise of cognitive skills)
6. Use of hired labor	No hired labor	Semi-skilled	Unskilled, often seasonal	Professional/quasi-professional, technicians, semi-skilled skilled, unskilled
7. Agricultural status determinants	Land ownership, craft skills	Land ownership, production volume, equipment	Production volume, capital ownership, profits	Cognitive skills, control over volume of production

FOOTNOTES

2. Essentially the same is true for Canadian farms (see Steeves, 1979: 576).
3. The proportion of skilled and semi-skilled blue-collar workers in the Illinois small-farm sample is quite high in comparison to the total male labor force of the two counties.
4. Steeves' (1979) data make it clear that cross-sectional analyses contribute to serious underestimates of flows into and out of agriculture. High mobility rates, much higher than the conventional wisdom would identify, do not deny the possibility of a stable core, however.
5. There is no unilinear change process implied by the format of the figure either. Linkages between contemporary small-scale agriculture and subsistence farming have been avoided to minimize implications of unilinear change, and one might point out that agribusiness has a fairly long history as well (see, for example, Jackson, 1956). The sketch is intended to identify what exists, now.
6. While manual skills may not be functionally important, symbolic association with the exercise of such skills is valued. It is quite common for agribusiness entrepreneurs to don the hats, boots, and on occasion denims associated with manual work in agriculture. The rhetoric associated with farm work is also valued and used where it will serve a useful purpose. Manipulation of symbols such as that described here may be deliberate and may also stem from uncertainty about recognition of professional credentials.
7. It is relevant to note that the American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers was founded in 1929, has over 2,500 members at present, has published a journal since 1937, and includes among its functions the formal accreditation of both farm managers and rural appraisers. The distinction between farming as occupation and profession is supported by the existence of this organization and other like it in other countries.

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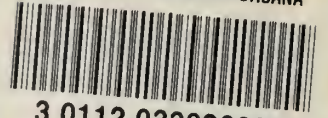
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